

Suppositions & Release

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A talk by Ajahn Chah newly translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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All the things in the world are suppositions that we've supposed into being. Once we've supposed them, we fall for our own supposings, so nobody lets them go. They turn into views and pride, into attachment. This attachment is something that never ends. It's an affair of *samsara* that flows without respite with no way of coming to closure. But if we really know our suppositions, we'll know release. If we really know release, we'll know our suppositions. That's when you know the Dhamma that can come to closure.

Take people, for instance. When we start out, we're born without names. The fact that we have names comes from their being supposed into being. I've thought about this and seen that if you don't really know suppositions, they can cause a lot of harm. Actually, suppositions are simply things for us to use. If we understand what they're for, that's enough. Know that if we didn't have suppositions, there would be nothing we could say to one another, no language to use with one another.

When I went abroad, I saw Westerners sitting in meditation in row after row. When they got up after sitting, men and women together, sometimes they'd go and touch one another on the head, one person after another! When I saw this I thought, "Hmm, if we set up a supposition anywhere and cling to it, it gives rise to defilements right there." If we're willing to let go of our suppositions, we can be at peace.

Like the generals and colonels, men of rank and position, who come to see me. When they come they say, "Oh, please touch my head": That shows that they're willing, so there's nothing wrong with it. You can rub their heads, and they're even glad you did it. But if you rubbed their heads in the middle of the street, there'd be a big fuss! This is because of clinging. So I've seen that letting go is really comfortable. When they agree to having their heads touched, they've supposed that there's nothing wrong with it. And there is nothing wrong with it, just like rubbing a cauliflower head or a head of lettuce. But if you rubbed their heads in the middle of the road, they wouldn't stand for it for sure.

It's all a matter of willingness—accepting, giving up, letting go. When you can do this, things are light. Wherever you're clinging, there's becoming right there, birth right there, poison and danger right there. The Buddha taught about suppositions and he taught to undo suppositions in the right way, to turn them into release. Don't cling to them.

The things that arise in the world are all suppositions. That's how they come into being. When they've arisen and been supposed, we shouldn't fall for them, for that leads to suffering. The affairs of supposition and convention are extremely important. Whoever can let them go is free from suffering.

But they're an activity of this world of ours. Take Boonmaa, for instance. He's the District Commissioner. His old friend, Saengchai, isn't a district commissioner, but they've been friends from way back. Now that Boonmaa has been appointed district commissioner, there's a supposition right there, but you have to know how to use it in an appropriate way, because we still live in the world. If Saengchai goes to the district offices and pats Boonmaa on the head, it's not right. Even if Saengchai thinks about all the old times when they worked together as traveling tailors and about that time they almost died, it's still not right for him to go playing around with Boonmaa's head in front of other people. You have to show a little respect. You have to practice in line with our social suppositions. Only then can we live together in peace. No matter how long you've been friends, he's now the district commissioner. You have to show him some deference. When he leaves the district offices and goes home, that's when you can pat him on the head. It's the district commissioner's head you're patting, but when you do it in his home, it doesn't matter. If you were to do it in the government offices in front of a lot of people, it'd be wrong. This is called showing respect. If you know how to use suppositions in this way, they serve a purpose. No matter how long you've been close friends, if you touch him on the head in front of a lot of people, he's sure to get angry—after all, he's now the district commissioner. This is all there is to our behavior in the world: You need a sense of time and place, and of the people you're with.

So we're taught to be intelligent, to have a sense of suppositions and a sense of release. Understand them when you use them. If you use them properly, there's no problem. If you don't use them properly, it's offensive. What does it offend? It offends people's defilements, that's all—because people live with defilement. There are suppositions you have to follow with certain groups, certain people, certain times and places. If you follow them appropriately, you can be said to be smart. You have to know where these things come from and how far they lead. We have to live with suppositions, but we suffer when we cling to them. If you understand suppositions simply as suppositions and explore them until you come to release, there are no problems.

As I've often said, before we were laymen and now we're monks. Before we were supposed to be laymen but now, having gone through the ordination chant, we're supposed to be monks. But we're monks on the level of supposition, not genuine monks, not monks on the level of release. If we practice so that our minds are released from all their fermentations (*asava*) step by step, as stream-winners, once-returners, non-returners, all the way to arahantship, then all our defilements will be abandoned. Even when we say that someone is an arahant, that's a just supposition—but he's a genuine monk.

In the beginning we start with suppositions like this. In the ordination ceremony they agree to call you a "monk," but does that mean you can suddenly abandon your defilements? No. It's like taking a fistful of sand and saying, "Suppose this is salt." Is it salt? Sure it is, but only on the level of supposing. It's not genuine salt. If you were to put it into a curry, it wouldn't serve any purpose. If you were to argue that it's genuine salt, the answer would have to be No. That's what's meant by supposition.

The word "release" is something supposed into being, but what it actually is, lies beyond supposition. When there's release, all our suppositions are released. That's all there is to it. Can we live without suppositions? No. If we didn't have suppositions, we wouldn't know how to talk with each other. We wouldn't know where things come from and how far they go. We wouldn't have any language to speak with one another.

So suppositions have their purposes—the purposes we're supposed to use them for. For example, people have different names, even though they're all people just the same. If we didn't have names, you wouldn't know how to call the person you wanted. For instance, if you wanted to call a particular person in a crowd and said, "Person! Person!" that would be useless. No one would answer, because they're all "person." But if you called, "Jan! Come here!" then Jan would come. The others wouldn't have to. This is how suppositions serve a purpose. Things get accomplished. So there are ways for us to train ourselves that arise from suppositions.

If we know both supposition and release in the proper way, we can get along. Suppositions have their uses, but in reality there really isn't anything there. There isn't even a person there! There's just a set of natural conditions, born of their causal factors. They develop in dependence on causal factors, stay for a while, and before long they fall apart. You can't stop that from happening. You can't really control it. That's all there is. It's just a supposition, but without suppositions we'd have nothing to say: no names, no practice, no work, no language. Suppositions and conventions are established to give us a language, to make things convenient, that's all.

Take money, for example. In the past there wasn't any paper money. Paper was just paper, without any value. Then people decided that silver money was hard to store, so they turned paper into money. And so it serves as money. Maybe someday in the future a new king will arise who doesn't like paper money. He'll have us use wax droppings instead—take sealing wax, melt it, stamp it into lumps, and suppose it to be money. We'll be using wax droppings all over the country, getting into debt all because of wax droppings. Let alone wax droppings, we could take chicken droppings and turn them into money! It could happen. All our chicken droppings would be cash. We'd be fighting and killing one another over chicken droppings.

Even when they propose new forms for things, if everybody agrees to the new supposition, it works. As for the silver we started out with, nobody really knows what it is. The ore that we call silver, is it really silver? Nobody knows. Somebody saw what it was like, came up with the supposition of "silver," and that's what it was. That's all there is to the affairs of the world. We suppose something into being, and that's what it is—because we live with suppositions. But to turn these things into release, to get people to know genuine release: That's hard.

Our house, our money, our possessions, our family, our children, our relatives are ours simply on the level of supposition. But actually, on the level of the Dhamma, they're not really ours. We don't like to hear this, but that's the way they actually are. If we don't have any suppositions around them, they have no value. Or if we suppose them to have no value, they have no value. But if we suppose them to have value, they do. This is the way things are. These suppositions are good if we know how to use them.

Even this body of ours isn't really ours. We just suppose it to be so. It's a supposition. If you try to find a genuine self within it, you can't. There are merely elements that are born, continue for a while, and then die. Everything is like this. There's no real, true substance to it, but it's proper that we have to use it.

For example, what do we need to stay alive? We need food. If our life depends on food as its nourishment, as a support we need to use, then we should use it to achieve its purpose. That's how the Buddha taught new monks. Right from the very beginning he taught the four supports: clothing, food, shelter, medicine. He taught that we

should contemplate these things. If we don't contemplate them in the morning, we should contemplate them in the evening after we've used them.

Why does he have us contemplate them so often? To realize that as long as we're alive we can't escape these things. "You'll use these things all your life," he said, "but don't fall for them. Their purpose is just to keep life going."

If we didn't have these things, we couldn't meditate, couldn't chant, couldn't contemplate. For the time being, we have to depend on these things, but don't get attached to them. Don't fall for the supposition that they're yours. They're supports for keeping you alive; when the time comes, you'll have to give them up. In the meantime, though, even though the idea that they're yours is just a supposition, you have to take care of them. If you don't take care of them, you suffer. Like a cup, for instance. At some point in the future the cup is going to break. If it breaks, no big deal—but as long as you're alive you should take good care of it because it's your utensil. If it breaks, you'll be put to trouble. If it's going to break, let it be broken in a way that can't be helped.

The same goes for the four supports that we're taught to contemplate. They're requisites for those who've gone forth. Understand them but don't cling to them to the point where the clinging becomes a big lump of craving and defilement in the heart and makes you suffer. Use them just for the purpose of keeping alive, and that's enough.

Suppositions and release are related like this continually. Even though we use suppositions, don't place your trust in them as being true. They're true only on the level of supposing. If you cling to them, suffering will arise because you don't understand them in line with what they really are. The same holds for issues of right and wrong. Some people see wrong as right and right as wrong, but *whose* right and wrong they are, nobody knows. Different people make different suppositions about what's right and wrong, so we have to know these things in every case. But the Buddha was afraid that it would lead to suffering if we got into arguments, because issues of this sort never come to closure. One person says, "right," another says, "wrong." One says "wrong," another says "right." But actually we don't really know right and wrong at all! All we need is to learn how to use them for our comfort, so that we can put them to work in a proper way. Don't let them harm you or harm others. Keep things neutral in this way. That serves our purposes.

In short, both suppositions and release are simply dhammas. One is higher than the other, but they're synonyms. There's no way we can guarantee for sure that this has to be this, or that has to be that, so the Buddha said to just put it down as "not for sure." No matter how much you like something, you have to know that it's not for sure. No matter how much you dislike something, you have to understand that it's not for sure. And these things really *aren't* for sure. Keep practicing until they're dhammas.

Past, present, or future: Make them all an affair of Dhamma practice. And it comes to closure at the point where there's nothing more. You've let go. Everything ends when you've put down the burden. I'll give you an analogy. One person asks, "Why is the flag fluttering? It must be because there's wind." Another person says, "It's fluttering because there's a flag." This sort of thing never comes to an end. The same as the old riddle, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" This never comes to an end. It just keeps spinning around in its circles.

All these things are simply suppositions. They arise from our supposing. So you have to understand suppositions and conventions. If you understand them, you'll understand inconstancy, stress, and not-self. This is a preoccupation that leads straight to nibbana.

Training and teaching people is really hard, you know. Some people have their opinions. You tell them something, and they say No. You tell them the truth and they say it's not true. "I'll take what's right for me; you take what's right for you." There's no end to this. If you don't let go, there'll be suffering.

I've told you before about the four men who go into the forest. They hear a chicken crowing, "*Ekkk-i-ekk-ekkkk!*" One of them comes up with the question, "Who says that's a rooster? Who says it's a hen?" For the fun of it, three of them put their heads together and say it's a hen. The other one says it's a rooster. They argue back and forth like this without stopping. Three of them say it's a hen, and only one of them says it's a rooster. "How could a hen crow like that?" he asks. "Well, it's got a mouth, doesn't it?" they reply. The one person argues until he starts crying. Actually, it *was* a rooster crowing, in line with our standard suppositions, but the one person had to argue until he started to cry. Yet on the ultimate level they were all wrong. The words "rooster" and "hen" are just suppositions.

If you asked the chicken, "Are you a rooster?" it wouldn't answer. If you asked, "Are you a hen?" it wouldn't give any explanation. But we have our conventions: These features are the features of a rooster; these features, the features of a hen. The rooster's crow is like this; a hen's squawk is like that. These are suppositions that are stuck in our world. But in truth there's no rooster, no hen. To speak on the level of the world's suppositions, the one person was right, but to argue to the point of crying doesn't serve any purpose at all. That's all there is to it.

So the Buddha taught not to cling to these things. If we don't hold onto things, how can we practice? We practice *because* of not clinging. To bring your discernment in here is hard. This is why it's hard not to cling. You need to use sharp discernment to contemplate this. Only then will you get anywhere. When you think about it, for the sake of relieving suffering, it doesn't depend on whether you have a lot of things or a little. Whether you're happy or

sad, content or discontent, it starts from your discernment. To go beyond suffering depends on discernment, seeing things in line with their truth.

The Buddha taught us to train ourselves, to contemplate, to meditate. "Meditation" means undoing these problems in line with the way they are. These are the issues: the issues of birth, aging, illness, and death. These are really common, ordinary things. This is why he has us contemplate them continually. He has us meditate on birth, aging, illness, and death. Some people don't understand why we have to contemplate them. "We already know birth," they say. "We already know death. They're such ordinary issues." So true....

A person who investigates these things again and again will see. When you see, you can gradually undo these problems. Although you may still have some clinging, if you have the discernment to see that these things are normal you'll be able to relieve suffering. This is why we practice for the sake of undoing suffering.

The basic principles of the Buddha's teaching aren't much: just suffering arising and suffering ceasing. That's why these things are called noble truths. If you don't know these things, you suffer. If you argue through your pride and opinions, there's no end to it. To get the mind to relieve its suffering and be at ease, you have to contemplate what's happened in the past, what's in the present, what's going to be in the future. What can you do not to be worried about birth, aging, illness, and death? There will be some worries, but if you can learn to understand them for what they are, suffering will gradually lessen, because you don't hug it to your chest.

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